

By Jennifer Lewington

# Accountability: Reality or Pretense



## On the surface,

Winnipeg's Glenlawn Collegiate was under no pressure to change itself several years ago. A suburban high school of 1,000 students, Glenlawn had rebuilt after a 1993 fire, boasted a strong theatre arts program, and sent most of its graduates on to university. Or so it thought. It was only when the high school began to ask some tough questions about its performance that a different picture emerged — one that gradually led to important changes in how Glenlawn related to its students and its community.

This is what accountability should look like in education. At its best, accountability is rooted in a desire to ask hard questions, gather information, and act on the results. Unfortunately, those in education — from the politician to the classroom teacher — too often pay only lip-service to accountability, as if the sheer weightiness of the word is enough to suggest that something big is going on. But it is the pretense of accountability that breeds cynicism in the minds of parents and the public — the very allies needed to strengthen public education — who on the evidence begin to suspect that the education sector is incapable of real or lasting improvements.

The tortured history of testing in Canada in the 1990s is a case in point.

When the provincial ministers of education launched a pan-Canadian exercise to test the reading, writing, math, and science abilities of students, it was an important breakthrough, despite provoking resistance from teacher unions that continues today. Lost in the political hubbub over testing, though, was the troubling realization that the provinces were only playing at accountability. They never spelled out the common standard for assessing student performance and organized the reporting of the results in ways that made it virtually impossible for the public to compare student achievement in different jurisdictions across the country. The exercise should have been an opportunity to compare notes on content, teaching style, and student needs — and make the necessary adjustments. Instead, it has concealed more than it has revealed, leaving the public as ambivalent as ever about the value and purpose of testing.

School trustees, the locally-elected intermediaries between the neighbourhood school and the provincial ministries of education, have squandered their own opportunities to give meaning to accountability. In the 1990s, when provincial governments seized the financial reins, a lot of school boards focussed on the wrong issues — trustee pay, cutbacks, and the loss of political

power. By contrast, the smart school boards focussed on what was happening in the classroom and, in spite of cutbacks, introduced programs, testing, and supports to serve the academic and social needs of an increasingly heterogeneous population. They were also bold enough — and brave enough — to develop school profiles that put student achievement in context. What they found was often revealing.

For example, schools in less-affluent areas sometimes outperformed the board-wide average on student achievement, even outdoing richer schools whose students had extra supports from home. Despite the disadvantages of income, the less-affluent schools appeared to do well because the principal and teachers had a clear pedagogical game-plan, followed it, and involved the community in setting high expectations for student performance. This is what accountability looks like when it is practiced well. The dividends are evident. Teachers and principals that talk straight to parents and the community are also the ones who inspire great loyalty to the school, not least because they see good things happening to students.

Recently, the Canadian School Boards Association identified a number of interventions to help schools and communities, working together, to improve the lives of children in poverty. The manual will give local school boards a way to assess their own performance in addressing the poverty issue, as well as an entree to talk to local communities about how education and other groups can work better together to support a strong, healthy learning experience for all students.

It was that focus on the students that made the exercise in accountability by Glenlawn, the Winnipeg school, so honest. With funding from a Manitoba-based high school reform project that was backed by the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation, Glenlawn assessed its own performance by talking to students and graduates. What it found came as a shock. Only 28 per cent of Glenlawn graduates went to university compared to 35 per cent nationally. Moreover, one-third of Glenlawn graduates who attended the University of Manitoba dropped out before getting their degree. That information, along with other data on student attitudes, sparked some difficult soul-searching by teachers, administrators, parents and students. In the end, through some hard slogging in and outside the school, Glenlawn initiated some changes in curriculum and teaching practices. The most motivating teachers were teamed up with the students most at risk of falling through the cracks. In ways big and small, Glenlawn changed the way it related to students, so that those 'in the middle' academically would engage with life — and learning — at the school.

Schools like Glenlawn are doing the right thing by practicing, not playing at, accountability. They — and others — need every encouragement to get even better at what they do, in support of all students and learning. 🍎

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**Jennifer Lewington** reported on education trends for the *Globe and Mail* for the period 1991-98 and is currently Toronto bureau chief.  
jlewington@globeandmail.ca